

FEATURE

Pope canonizes Mother Katharine Drexel, others

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II canonized the second U.S.-born saint, Mother Katharine Drexel, and said her use of a family fortune to help educate the poor was a shining example of American generosity.

At a jubilee Mass Oct. 1, the pope praised Mother Drexel, a Philadelphia heiress, for recognizing the dangers of racism in U.S. society, then giving all she had — spiritually and materially — to fight it. She eventually founded more than 60 schools for African-Americans and Native Americans.

Her apostolate helped bring about a growing awareness of the need to combat all forms of racism through education and social services, the pope said.

Katharine Drexel is an excellent example of that practical charity and generous solidarity with the less fortunate that has long been the distinguishing mark of American Catholics, he said.

During the two-hour liturgy in St. Peter's Square, the pope also canonized 120 Chinese martyrs, calling them models of courage for all China. Responding indirectly to criticism from Chinese authorities, the pope said the 87 natives of China and 33 foreign missionaries all loved China, and their canonization was an honor for the country.

Also declared saints were Sister Josephine Bakhita, a black African slave from Sudan who became a member of the Daughters of Charity, and Sister Maria Josefa Sancho de Guerra, a Spaniard who founded a religious order, the Sister Servants of Jesus of Charity, in the late 1800s.

More than 3,000 rain-dampened U.S. pilgrims applauded as the sainthood decree



Reuters/CNS

An image of Mother Katharine Drexel hangs from the facade of St. Peter's Basilica Oct. 1. She became the second American-born saint during the canonization ceremony celebrated by Pope John Paul II.

for Mother Drexel was read at the start of the Mass. A banner hung from the facade of St. Peter's Basilica depicted Mother Drexel walking with two schoolchildren, an African-American boy and an Indian girl.

The liturgy's second reading, from the letter of James, was a pointed warning to the wealthy: "You rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries. Your wealth has rotted, your fine wardrobe has grown moth-eaten, your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion shall be a testimony against you."

In his sermon, the pope contrasted that warning with the conviction of young Katharine Drexel that "her family's posses-

sions were not for them alone but were meant to be shared with the less fortunate." Born in 1858, she inherited an investment banking fortune worth \$14 million.

The pope described how, as a young woman in the late 1800s, she was deeply moved by the suffering endured by many African-Americans and Native Americans. Using her inheritance, she built missions and schools dedicated to helping them.

She later decided to become a nun and founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, which carried out a teaching apostolate among the poor. The pope noted that Mother Drexel taught a spirituality that combined prayerful union with the eucharistic Lord and zealous service to the victims of racial discrimination.

He said he hoped this example of faith in action would appeal to young people today, showing them there is nothing better

than following Christ with an undivided heart and sharing one's gifts in the service of others, to build a more just world.

Among those who came to Rome for Mother Drexel's canonization were many who had met her personally before her death in 1955, including some who had been taught in her schools.

"What she did was not easy. She encountered many difficulties in creating these schools, and we can never repay her. I could not have done what I did without her," said Robert A. Simon, an African-American who was taught in one of Mother Drexel's elementary schools in Lake Charles, La., and recalls her visiting from time to time. He went on to become a general manager in the U.S. Postal Service.

Attending the Mass were members of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, whose 225 nuns run more than 40 schools and ministry sites in 13 states. Also present were faculty, students and alumni of Xavier University of Louisiana, which Mother Drexel founded in 1915 and which became a leading institution for black education in the segregated South.

Among those seated near the altar was Robert Gutherman, whose cure from inner ear disease in 1974 was attributed to the miraculous intercession of Mother Drexel.

Earlier this year, church authorities officially recognized another miracle attributed to Mother Drexel's intercession when a U.S. girl, Amy Wall, was cured of deafness in 1994. That cleared the way for Mother Drexel's canonization, completing a process that began 36 years ago in Philadelphia.


The pope's sermon touched on a recent war of words between the Vatican and China over the canonizations, which Chinese authorities claimed would exalt "criminals" condemned and executed under Chinese law. Most of the martyrs died in the anti-foreigner Boxer Rebellion of 1900.

The pope said the canonization Mass was not the moment to "form judgments on these historical periods."

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